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Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels*,

New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, 304 pp.

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balance has been struck between the presentation of institutional and legal data and attention to day-to-day political and administrative functions. Further, the intensity of challenges facing the CCP are repeatedly stressed and explained. The book would therefore be useful for all those still concerned with the reasons behind the choices made by the Xi Jinping administration since it came to power: current developments indirectly confirm the wisdom of a number of the author's observations. Beyond or within the study of economic, cultural, and social change, renewed attention to the strictly political dimension of China's course is needed, and this book makes a remarkable contribution in setting out the nature and challenges of this course.

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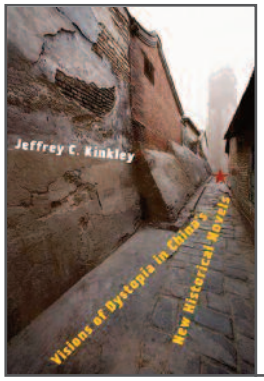

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Recent years have seen an increase in the number of dystopian novels appearing in post-Tiananmen Square Chinese literature. In *Prosperous Age: China in the year 2013* (盛世: 中國, 2013) (2009), Chan Koon-chung (Chen Guanzhong) demystifies harmonious society and imperialist pretensions. Yan Lianke's *The Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書) (2010) is a fictional account of the re-education camps, written to expose a totalitarian and dehumanising world. Meanwhile *Death Fugue* (*Siwang fuge* 死亡賦格) (2013), by Sheng Keyi, revisits the events of 1989 in Tiananmen Square through the allegory of a "best of all possible worlds" in which young people escape one dictatorship only to fall into the clutches of another. Without turning a blind eye to science fiction, a genre that is growing rapidly in China, often fluctuating between anticipation and reality (as exemplified by Han Song in *Subway* (*Ditie* 地鐵) (2010), in which the author warns of imminent cataclysms concealed by flamboyant urban development), the abundance of this dystopian literature portrays a general disillusionment, while also revealing a critical space, more or less tolerated, against amnesia concerning violence in history, the triumph of liberalism, and the myth of the rebirth of the nation while ignoring the social and geopolitical tensions and ecological catastrophes that predictably result.

In his latest work, Jeffrey C. Kinkley carries out a large-scale study of this literature, but takes us back in time and examines the subject through the relationship between history and dystopia. He focuses on a collection of novels and films with historical themes, essentially produced in the 1990s by some of the most outstanding writers and directors of the period, such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, Wang Anyi, Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, Ge Fei, Li Rui and Zhang Wei, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Stanley Kwan. However, the main body of the work, which studies 17 "major novels," covers a longer period, since Zhang Wei's *The Ancient Ship* (*Guchuan* 古船) was written in 1986, and Ge Fei's *Jiangnan Trilogy* (*Jiangnan sanbuqu* 江南三部曲) was completed in 2011. The aim of the author is to show the ideological rupture caused by the tragedy of Tiananmen, which tipped the progressive utopia towards a vision of general dystopia. The perfect crisis, and its accompanying premonitory signs, has had lasting effects on creativity.

The term "new historical novels" (*xin lishi xiaoshuo* 新歷史小說 or *xin lishizhuyi xiaoshuo* 新歷史主義小說) that describes these works is only indirectly linked with the *new historicism* movement in Western literature. The author appears rather to be referring to Chinese criticism, which has frequently re-appropriated use of the term since the 1990s to describe altered accounts of official news stories. *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang jiazu* 紅高粱家族) by Mo Yan and *Wives and Concubines* (*Qiqie chengqun* 妻妾成群) by Su Tong, which were both made into films by Zhang Yimou, started this trend of irreverence towards established historiography, paying tribute to local cultures and traditional customs, which were in many cases reimagined and reinvented. Jeffrey C. Kinkley argues that the re-writing of history, which increased in the last decade of the twentieth century, goes beyond folkloric connotations to produce a vision that is not merely pessimistic, but powerfully dystopian, since the repeated violence and successive nature of disasters in contemporary history are clear signs of irreversible moral decline, directly challenging Mencius' theory about the innate goodness of man and therefore the future of humanity (pp. 20 and 27).

The main part of the work is divided into four chapters, which can be grouped into two large sections. In the first (Chapters 2 and 3), the author examines the intrinsic temporality of these novels, highlighting the harmful and repetitive cyclicity which, unlike traditional portrayals of time as a cyclical, alternating concept, shows the inexorable decline into which Chinese society is falling, as seen, for example, in Li Riu's *Silver City* (*Jiuzhi* 舊址) or Mo Yan's *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* (*Shengsi pilao* 生死疲勞). The second (Chapters 4 and 5) concerns a more "spatial approach," and focuses on analysing the breakdown of the social structure. The individual appears to be caught between two inevitabilities: on the one hand, repression or imprisonment, for which the family is partly responsible, and, on the other, anarchy, which sees the triumph of chaos and mankind's animal cruelty. Jeffrey C. Kinkley owes his approach to his reasoning as a historian, because he refuses to apply a psychological analysis to the trauma, considering these thematic-structural configurations to originate from observable "external" events and facts. In the same way, following in the footsteps of Hayden White and Paul Ricœur, he opts for a hermeneutical approach, identifying these texts as accounts written from memory and representations, carrying intent and seen through a prism, hence the author's scrutiny on the literary reconfiguration of history. A painstaking effort has therefore been made to dismantle the sophisticated mechanism of time and space in these writings characterised by formal elaborations that could qualify as avant-garde, shedding light on the specific way in which literary discourse presents the destructive effects of history. Comparative and contrastive analyses enrich the author's reflections when he makes heuristic comparisons between Chinese novels and the "magical realism" of Latin American literature, or the views of the time, such as educational textbooks, in which the official historiography and *doxa* are crystallised. The issue set down at the start, which purports that fiction constitutes a massive antithesis to the triumphant

Darwinism (pp. 180-181) that has dominated China for more than a century, is investigated by means of these multiple approaches, and the pattern that emerges is the reverse, revealing a damaging continuum that links wars, revolutions, socialist dictatorship, and the fundamentalism of prosperity, (in)variably imposed by the perverted ideology of progress and by the power of might. The dystopian borders on the apocalyptic, but the author avoids using this word, considering it unsuitable for describing what is a never-ending vicious circle without revelation. Jeffrey C. Kinkley brings to light the standpoint of this group of writers and film-makers who denounce the lack of reflection in contemporary Chinese history and refuse to simply forget and give in to the cynicism that characterises the postmodern game. At the same time, a line of reasoning that tends towards viewing the lack of change as an absolute fact, bearing out systematic images of stagnation, cyclicity, or recurrence, also raises the question as to whether such an interpretation is safe from the temptation of culturalism, which can be seen in the theory of the "ultra-stability" of Chinese society, as formulated in the recent past by Jin Guantao. One also wonders if the emphasis placed on atavism lessens the dialectic of memory and desire, which is virtually absent from the exposition, but is clearly at work in certain texts, such as Ge Fei's *Jiangnan Trilogy*. Finally, the modernist aesthetic, which holds the author's attention, would have favoured more subtle reflection, so as to better determine whether the stories feeding from it merely rebuild the ruins or if they differentiate between historical mourning, which looks to a past that has never been, and "poetic" mourning, the aspiration to an ideal without which we would not know how to live, in the terms of Karl-Heinz Bohrer. Indeed, a major issue is at stake. To what extent can it be justifiably claimed that these novels are driven only by a "cultural mission" (p. 201), and are not intended to put politics to the test? Instead of being a behavioural motif whereby hope rests on vague escapist impulses, does "friendship" (pp. 152-156) not prove rather to be a genuine source of social resistance to the single-party state? Hence the final question of knowing whether the fall from utopia to dystopia constitutes a vector that functions alone, or if it is coupled with an underground movement that makes utopia the "other" of history (H. White), i.e., a denial and a transcendence of determinism, whether historical or not.

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